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*(PJO)*CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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MEMORANDUMCUBA: Castro's Next Moves

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Summary

Although the flow of Cuban refugees into Florida is continuing at a rate of about 500 per week, the usefulness of the exodus from Mariel as a means of leverage against the United States has been decisively undercut. In addition, the drop in the rate of the refugee flow means it will take much longer for the Castro regime to achieve all of the economic and political benefits it expects from reduced consumption and the expulsion of troublemakers and the disgruntled. As a result, President Castro is now in the position of having to come up with new schemes to bolster sagging confidence at home, regain international prestige, and entice the US into a dialogue on bilateral problems. To the extent that problems in Cuba and international tensions deny him success both at home and abroad, his self-confidence will falter and his overall conduct of policy will probably become more erratic.

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Castro recognizes certain restrictions on his freedom to maneuver. For example, he does not want to provoke Moscow's ire or take the kind of action that could draw a US military response. He believes US patience has already worn thin and he does not want to do anything to give what he views as Washington's "hawks" an opportunity to argue for military force.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Latin America Division of the Office of Political Analysis, and [redacted] the Center for Analysis [redacted] Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. Comments and questions are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Latin America Division, [redacted]

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Neither does he want to do anything that might contribute to the chances for a change in administration in Washington in January. Although concerned about the present downward trend in bilateral relations, he sees a change in administration as even less favorable for Cuban interests. [redacted]

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Castro has seen his initial probings of the US attitude toward a broad bilateral dialogue rejected. Nevertheless, he almost certainly believes he must continue his efforts to engage the United States in talks. He probably also remains convinced that insisting on talks that cover all issues--not just refugees --is a tactical imperative. [redacted]

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His restrained performance at the celebrations in Nicaragua on 19 July is a sign he has decided on a new, more reasonable approach, at least for now. His major address on 26 July--the most important holiday in Cuba--should give further clues as to the path he will follow in the next several months. [redacted]

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Despite his awareness of Cuba's internal problems, Castro is unlikely to restrict his international activities and concentrate on remedying problems at home. On the contrary, his longstanding ability to focus public attention on the United States and his success in recent years in exploiting opportunities in Africa and Central America argue for increased Cuban efforts in the international arena. [redacted]

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Victories, however, are not likely to be achieved easily. The Soviet troops fighting in Afghanistan will make Castro's attempts to sustain a leadership role in the nonaligned movement more difficult. Increased international tensions will make Cuban military adventures abroad more risky. [redacted]

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The decreased likelihood of success on the international scene, in concert with the bleak prospects for improvement at home, will further depress Castro. As a consequence, his leadership may prove more erratic--characterized by more impulsive and less judicious behavior both at home and abroad. [redacted]

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The Options

Castro apparently is convinced that a dialogue with the United States could lead to a major improvement in Cuba's present status. He has indicated his willingness to talk through several channels so far this year. He even orchestrated the refugee exodus in such a manner as to try to force the US to the negotiating table. With his trial balloons deflated, his refugee gambit successfully countered, and elections in the US drawing near, he may decide that further attempts to force the United States into discussions should be postponed until after November. On the other hand, he could continue to try to compel Washington to focus on Cuba. [redacted]

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Should he choose the confrontational course, Castro has a number of options. At the lower end of the risk spectrum he could:

- Attempt to bypass the US cordon sanitaire in the Florida Strait by opening different Cuban ports to a resumption of the boatlift.
- Generate pressure on Washington through the exile community in the United States.
- Encourage a large refugee influx into the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, thus undermining base security and focusing international attention on a major bone of contention with the US.
- Increase pressure on US citizens in Cuban prisons, expecting to trigger human rights sensitivities in Washington.
- Promote a vigorous new campaign for Puerto Rican independence or bring the Guantanamo Naval Base issue to the UN.
- Harass the personnel of the US Interests Section in Havana.

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At the higher end of the risk spectrum, the options are more ominous. Castro could:

- Create an incident at the Guantanamo Naval Base by violating regulations governing navigation through the base.
- Threaten the base by manning the permanent gun emplacements to the north of the base that are now empty.
- Increase the tempo of his support to hemispheric revolutionaries, confident that this would get quick attention in the United States.

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The Decision

If Castro chooses confrontation, his moves probably will remain in the low-risk category for some time, at least through November.

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Castro is faced with conflicting incentives. On the one hand, he realizes he must manufacture bargaining capital if he is to achieve any significant progress in bilateral talks. Because he has little of a positive nature to offer, he may concentrate on negatives. He may hope to gain US concessions in exchange for:

- Lowering his anti-US propaganda.
- Tempering Cuban agitation for Puerto Rican independence.
- Ceasing his harassment of the US Interests Section in Havana or US citizens in Cuban jails.
- Reducing the flow of refugees to acceptable, more manageable levels.

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To force Washington to focus on these issues, however, he must raise them by various contrived crises and subterfuges to the level of serious irritants. In short, he has an incentive to continue to antagonize the United States.

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On the other hand, the Cuban leader recognizes that such actions might undercut the administration's election campaign. Castro's public remarks in Nicaragua last weekend showed concern over the implications for Cuba of a Republican victory in November. Thus, Havana also has considerable reason not to provoke the United States. Indeed, he may even seek to create good will by solving the asylee problem at the US Interests Section or by unilaterally reducing the level of anti-US invective in the Cuban media.

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Unless unforeseen developments help to halt or reverse the present downward trend in the fortunes of his regime, Castro will become more frustrated and his resistance to the riskier options could diminish. He then would become more prone to compulsive actions and would depend heavily on his proven ability to exploit crises to his advantage. [redacted]

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As a result, the chances of a miscalculation on his part--such as the "Blue Fire" incident--would be greatly enhanced and he might embark on a course of action that produced the opposite of what was intended, such as a military clash with the United States. Despite his reputation for political acumen, the Cuban leader is not immune to serious blunders. [redacted]

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